

Book Review

The Cambridge Companion to Dewey

Justin Bell

Molly Cochran (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 356 +xvii pages. ISBN 978-0-521-69746-0. \$25.00 (pbk.)

In a typical book review, I would look for and examine what is new about a particular thinker's idea or presentation. However, as I read *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey* I find that I cannot and should not use the same criteria for evaluation. I pick up a *Cambridge Companion* when I need an introduction or a refresher on material—not when I need to see what the cutting-edge scholarship is. That being said, a companion ought not propagate the status quo or fail to communicate what is current in the understanding of a figure or an area. Therefore, a companion ought, first, to provide an adequate introduction to a literate, but inexperienced, person to the field it purports to introduce. Second, a companion should show the diversity of thought about a subject—what are the controversies and various thoughts about a figure that one might encounter. I do not expect every heterodox reading of a figure, but I would desire to know various understandings of that figure. Finally, a companion should impart the tools to start independent research on the figure in question. With this in mind, I turn to *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*.

Robert Westbrook's biographical chapter is accessible and informative. His discussion of the role of Dewey's first wife Alice and his political awareness in Chicago is instructive on how deeply democratic social life informs Dewey's thought.

Ruth Anna Putnam's contribution to the volume is laudatory. While using the general language of contemporary philosophy, she dissolves many of the problems analytic philosophers might have in interpreting Dewey's language. It is also noteworthy that Putnam acknowledges Dewey's similarities and indebtedness to

Peirce in regard to the theory of truth—the agreement of all possible inquirers after all possible inquiry. Putnam, further, does an admirable job of showing how Dewey does not fall into the opposing schools of realism or antirealism, instead presenting Dewey's philosophy of experience. Dewey's theory of inquiry is not simply another epistemological category but a unifying activity that brings together all parts of inquisitive activity—including ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology.

Richard M. Gale provides a highly critical chapter suggesting that Dewey's naturalism is a distinctly humanistic variety of naturalism that seeks to set up a near-Hegelian, completely continuous metaphysical monism in which the organism and environment collapse together. Gale suggests this is a version of claiming that naturalism of Dewey's sort "depict[s] nature as made for us human beings because it answers back to our deepest feelings and aspirations" (55). Gale understands Dewey's naturalism to hold that all of nature is continuous and that our interaction with it as organisms is wholly aesthetic with cognition as an immanent quality (even accusing Dewey of scholasticism by claiming that Dewey holds that inquiry is immanent in all matter because an effect cannot have more reality than its cause).

Isaac Levi also contributes a critical chapter on Dewey's theory of inquiry. Levi presents Dewey's theory of inquiry against Peirce's theory of fixing belief—pointing out that Peirce's theory allows for the fixation of belief in irrational, but all too human, manners that have more explanatory power. Levi's concern is that doubt can be settled by means other than inquiry. This criticism of Deweyan inquiry arises from Dewey's commitment that all problematic situations ought to be brought to determinacy by inquiry. This would imply, on Levi's reading, that whenever a belief is formed the inquirer should play that belief out to all its logical consequences (88). Levi's overall point is that there are, when we investigate the problems of life as opposed to the problems of philosophers, many (often successful) means of fixing belief. Further, Levi suggests a reconstruction of Dewey's thought where we understand belief as commitment to a point of view.

J. E. Tiles argues that Dewey's philosophy takes James's radical empiricism as a starting point and expands his philosophy of experience to include not only the possibility of experience as an interaction of organism and environment, but also recognizes that experience occurs consciously and subconsciously (102-03). Tiles adequately and clearly presents Dewey's position that logic is the study of inquiry and that inquiry is always empirical.

Mark Johnson seeks to show that Dewey's philosophy is a nonreductive naturalistic philosophy of mind that accords with contemporary neuroscience. Johnson argues that Dewey's breakdown of the mind/body dualism agrees with contemporary neuroscience (127) and provides a meaningful and important manner in which to talk about mind as an achievement of embodied inquirers (126). Johnson rightly states, "mind emerges when symbolic interaction and sharing of meanings becomes possible for a group of creatures" (128). While Johnson shows how an organism in an environment functionalizes "mind," he is careful to do so in a

nonreductive manner. Johnson argues that situations are always “saturated with feeling, meaning, and interest” (133) and demonstrates the import of Dewey to contemporary neuroscience.

Matthias Jung argues that the work of Dewey can help to illuminate obscurity between the dichotomous camps of rationalist action theorists who seek to describe how thought effects activity and those empiricists who seek to show how activity can take place in a situation. Both these camps leave out important factors of activity. Jung writes: “Emphasizing the importance of *situation*, *corporeality*, and *sociality*, against . . . tacit assumptions of both normative and rational choice theories of action, the pragmatists, especially John Dewey, offer an alternative” (147). Jung sees Dewey’s rejection of the reflex arc as a legitimate description of activity and applauds Dewey’s a theory of embodiment (154). The essay concludes by describing the benefits of Dewey’s theory of mind for cognitive science and artificial intelligence.

Jennifer Welchman’s contribution to the volume is a valuable introduction to the often cryptic and confusing world of pragmatic ethics. Dewey rejects universal or rational principles and introduces a socially embedded, practical, and situational ethics. Understanding that “all practical judgment is functional or instrumental,” Welchman argues that there is a difference between what is valued and what is a warranted valuation (172). While values are what is simply prized or desired, valuations are those values that are judged as important in a moral situation. Importantly, Welchman emphasizes the inherently and unavoidably social aspects of ethical deliberation (176) and the pluralistic moral factors involved in moral deliberation (179). She cites the pluralistic moral philosophy of “Three Independent Factors in Morals” and concludes that the moral life is not guided by any one principle but is rather a form of “pluralistic welfare consequentialism” (182).

In a very helpful contribution to this volume, James Bohman argues that “the purpose of Dewey’s naturalistic ethics is not merely descriptive, but ameliorative: he seeks to improve moral judgments and make them suitable to . . . new social circumstances” (187). Dewey’s moral theorizing lacks a focus on rendering activity consistent with some a priori or dogmatic norm but instead seeks to improve the meaning of lived situations. Especially helpful is Bohman’s exposition of moral inquiry as a dynamic change of habits. Bohman is careful to avoid an individualist or collectivist account of how habits are developed in a social milieu. Bohman sees Dewey’s “contextualism as a solution to a number of skeptical difficulties of moral philosophy,” understanding moral problems as practical, not theoretical, problems (199). Dewey’s work is thus rendered an important tool for changing concrete problematic situations.

Sami Pihlström presents Dewey’s mature religious thought in *A Common Faith*. Dewey’s religious philosophy argues that there is a religious experience without making dogmatic or empirically unfounded claims which are forwarded by various individual religions. Dewey’s insight that “the religious aspect of experience can be appreciated without metaphysical commitments of anything supernatural”

(211) is strengthened by Pihlström's careful consideration of Dewey's nonreductive naturalism, his commitment to an ethics of growth, and his straddling of realism and antirealism. Pihlström argues that "Dewey's pragmatic 'instrumentalism' . . . accommodates an intriguing tension between standard realisms and antirealisms" (221). Dewey's constructivism maintains "that objects are not independent of inquiry but pragmatically constructions arising out of an intelligent use of the methods of inquiry" (223). Thus Dewey is a realist (of a sort) insofar as he rejects "unnatural doubts about the reality of theoretical entities" and accepts "whatever the religiously inclined 'inquirer' finds necessary to postulate within her/his genuinely religious experience" (224). Pihlström concludes his essay with some informative work on how Dewey compares to his various contemporary religious naturalists.

Richard Eldridge contributes a chapter on Dewey's philosophy of art, discussing contributions of this philosophy to Dewey's overall project. Eldridge, citing *Art as Experience*, outlines the various arguments Dewey gives to explain that aesthetic experience leads to a philosophy of "organic interrelatedness" (246). Eldridge concludes his chapter by noting the criticisms of Dewey's overall project but also holds that "if we are to have any chance of living and meaning fully, intensely, and more adequately than we now do, then we shall have to imagine better modalities of life constructively" (260). Eldridge argues that Dewey's thought contributes to the imaginative manners that we can employ to construct our realities—and art is one good way to give "material embodiment to initiator-provoked, imaginative visions of human possibility" (261).

Nel Noddings provides what she calls an "appreciative critique" of Dewey's theory of education from the perspective of care ethics (265). Noddings finds that "care theory is largely compatible with Dewey's philosophy of education" (285). Her criticisms of Dewey focus mostly on omissions in Dewey's work on education or on topics where Dewey does not take his observation that education should be about experience deeply enough to incorporate the experience of women and those who find themselves forced to do mundane and often repetitive work. Noddings holds that care ethics provides an adequate expansion on what she understands to be omissions in Dewey's philosophy. By focusing on the dyadic relationship of cared-for and care-giver, Noddings hold that many of Dewey's omissions and vague points can be corrected. Noddings raises fair points about some of Dewey's explicit omissions and her "appreciative criticism" will only, I believe, increase the broad applicability of pragmatic philosophy.

Richard J. Bernstein contributes a helpful chapter on Dewey's democratic faith. Arguing that Dewey did not believe democracy to be simply a form of government where atomic individuals come together into a mass which becomes the sovereign majority. Instead, Bernstein rightly argues, Dewey's democratic faith is placed in a social ethos that recognizes that rich social ties and interactions constitute the dynamic creation of majorities. This vision of democracy has room for legitimate experts and does not fall into the mob rule of the *demos*. Bernstein con-

tinually emphasizes that Dewey's democratic theory is a social theory. Further, this contribution to the volume discusses the complex relationship Dewey has to communarians on one side and liberals on the other.

In the final chapter of this volume, Molly Cochran argues that Dewey's work has contemporary influence in the field of international relations. While discussing Dewey's shifting views on war, the outlawing of war, and international governance, Cochran argues that Dewey's vision of democracy, publics, and rejection of the Westphalian conception of states is important for contemporary studies of international relations. Dewey thus foreshadows the shift to normative approaches in international relations. Cochran concludes that Dewey's emphasis on the humanity of individuals and faith in the potential of education to form democratic publics is significant for contemporary discussions.

Overall, this volume satisfies the goals of the *Cambridge Companion* series. However the volume lacks a thoroughgoing discussion of Dewey's philosophy of education—Noddings' essay is good, but not sufficient for an explication of Dewey's role in progressive education and continuing influence in educational theory. I would also like to see more essays on Dewey's democratic theory, philosophy of art, and philosophy of technology. However, despite these omissions, the volume will satisfy many readers. Those new to Dewey's work will find several significant starting points where their own research into Dewey can begin and seasoned scholars will find the essays from well regarded philosophers helpful in their own projects.

Justin Bell is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at University of Houston – Victoria.
E-mail: bellj1@uhv.edu